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### Beyond Tara...Eclipsing the Image of Scarlett O'Hara

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*Beyond Tara. . .*  
*Eclipsing the Image of Scarlett O'Hara*

**A Literary Perspective of the "New" Southern Woman  
in the Novels, *Charms for the Easy Life*, *Crazy Ladies*,  
*Tending to Virginia*, and *The Odd Woman***



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College Scholars Senior Project  
Tennessee Scholars Project  
April 25, 1996

"You let Robert stay out past eleven when he was my age," she had said all through high school. "It's a little different," her mother always replied. "Robert is a *boy*."

A son is a son until he takes a wife, but a daughter is a daughter all of her life. That's what her mother says: that's what Gram says. "I cannot tell Susie how she's ironing Robert's shirts all wrong, the way the collar stands up," her mama says. "Robert is my son but he's a grown man and I can't go telling his wife how to iron. Then there is a pause, a deep breath like a big secret is about to be revealed. "But you are my daughter and I can tell you that a little spray starch is all it takes. A little spray starch will go a long way."

Jill McCorkle, *Tending to Virginia*

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	IV
1. This is My Story.....	1
2. All in the Family.....	15
3. The Evolution of Man.....	24
4. Conflicting Allegiances.....	37
5. The Perils of Progress.....	49
6. They Paved the Way.....	59
Appendices: Family Trees.....	61-64
<i>Charms for the Easy Life</i> .....	61
<i>Crazy Ladies</i> .....	62
<i>Tending to Virginia</i> .....	63
<i>The Odd Woman</i> .....	64
Works Cited.....	65
Bibliography.....	66

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# *This is My Story*

## Chapter One: An Introduction

When I was a little girl, I dreamed of being a cross between Little Orphan Annie and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Although I could never convince my mother to let me perm my hair or dye it red like Annie's, I did persuade her almost every morning to braid my hair or pull it up into two pig-tails on either side of my head. (Unless of course it was picture day at school. According to my mother, my long, brown hair always had to be down for pictures. Left side placed neatly over my shoulder, right side behind the ear.) Despite our ritual struggle, standing in front of her dresser mirror every morning screaming at one another, while my step-father cheerfully whistled the jingle of a local radio station in another room, I walked into school everyday looking to be what I thought was the spitting image of Dorothy. I was on my way to stardom--I had my hair braided down my back with two brightly colored ribbons holding each strand neatly in place, I knew every word to the song "*Over the Rainbow*," and on the off-chance that I didn't pass for Dorothy, I memorized both verse and chorus to Annie's theme song, "*Tomorrow*." These two young ladies, although fictional characters in two popular movies, were my heroes. They were cute, feisty, and full of energy. What eight-year-old little girl in the South didn't want to be just like the pre-adolescent songbird from Kansas or the freckled-face orphan from the streets of New York City?

Of course, when I was in the fifth grade, one event changed my entire outlook on life. I no longer longed to own a little dog named

Toto or Sandy and skip down the street singing at the top of my lungs. No, those were little girls' dreams and I was almost twelve-years-old. I was too old to wear my hair in pigtails, as Jeremy Collins reminded me the first time I bounced into my fifth-grade classroom with two ponytails swinging from either side of my head. I no longer wanted to be considered cute; at eleven, I wanted all of my parents' friends to say, "My, you're only in the fifth-grade. I thought you were probably already in junior high school." Amazingly, this sudden change in attitude did not stem from the onset of puberty, nor did it stem from Jeremy's tacky comments about my hair. No, I put Annie and Dorothy aside in exchange for a new role model, as if they were worn-out dolls thrown into an old toy chest to be replaced with a new, battery-operated robot. My new hero of sorts was a woman, not a little girl. She was beautiful, yet she was also assertive. She wore grand dresses and her hair was always meticulously in place, yet she worked with her hands in the dirt on her own land. She was coy, powerful, intelligent, and yet all the men still wanted her. Her name was Scarlett O'Hara and after watching her for three solid hours at a girlfriend's house one Friday night, I knew I wanted to be just like her when I grew up.

Ironically, people continue to compare me to Scarlett O'Hara over eleven years after I watched her walk down the steps of Tara for the first time. I assume that most Southern brunettes must tolerate this comparison at some point in their lives for no other reason than Scarlett is one of the few Southern female characters in our popular culture. Although I still claim *Gone with the Wind* to be one of my all-time favorite films, there is a part of me, a rather large

part of me, that while being flattered with the comparison wants to reject it on the basis of principle. Yes, I am more like Scarlett than I am one of the Hee-Haw girls, the Southern woman's other less-than-flattering prototype, but I am not the Southern belle so many people still believe accurately represents the South. I do not attend Junior League meetings or host luncheons for the other women in my neighborhood. I was never presented to society at a debutante ball, and I never "came out" of anything other than high school with a 3.90 GPA. My family does not own any black servants and I was raised by my mother, not a black mammy. I like to think that I have the grace, wit, charm, and intelligence of my childhood hero, but in my twenty-two years I have yet to "swoon" at the feet of an attractive man. (However, I did pass out in my eighth-grade health class during our discussion of the female reproductive system.)

Now that I am older, I can appreciate the tradition that a character like Scarlett O'Hara represents without feeling the pressure to imitate her. However, at eleven that distinction can be very difficult to make--the line between a fabricated image of perfect Southern femaleness and a British actress playing a fictitious role can often become blurred. Now it is easy to understand why I so enthusiastically replaced Annie and Dorothy with Scarlett. Scarlett not only looked like I did--she had long dark hair, a pale complexion, and was at most 5'2"--she also sounded like I did. She had a beautiful Southern accent that was considered quaint and charming, rather than unintelligible or irritating. She lived in the same state in which I was born and spoke of towns and cities I had actually visited. Her world, although over one-hundred-years-old, was my



world. It was not "over the rainbow," but in my backyard. And for the first time, in the fifth grade, I saw someone from the South portrayed as the heroine in a film, not the scapegoat or the dimwitted comic relief.

Although I continued to consciously imitate Scarlett O'Hara throughout junior high school, my perfect Southern world was invaded by Yankees during the county-wide career fair during my eighth-grade year. At the age of fourteen, I wanted to be a news broadcaster. My thirst for stardom had not disappeared with my change of role models. I wanted to be on television and I thought broadcasting was my best opportunity to accomplish this goal. In eighth-grade one hardly thinks too seriously about his or her career goals, but I raced to the local television station's booth at the career fair and asked one of the news anchors there what I could do to break into the business. He looked at me coldly and with a blank stare on his face he said, "Well, the first thing you could do is get rid of that accent." I thought I was going to break into tears right in front of him. Had he not seen *Gone with the Wind*? What did he mean get rid of "that accent?" Although I was completely dumbfounded by his rather tactless remark, I decided that afternoon to abandon my fixation with Scarlett and began to practice speaking without an accent. (*It's a nice night for a knife fight. Watch the i's! Try to sound like Cousin Jan from Michigan. Okay, once more.*)

Luckily, my mother, whose first visit to a movie theater was to see *Gone with the Wind*, not only noticed that I was beginning to sound like a telephone recording, but also convinced me that what I was doing was unnecessary. She told me that the Southern accent

was one of the most beautiful accents in the world and that I should be proud of mine. "As long as you speak correctly, grammatically correct, it doesn't matter what the words sound like coming out. You're from the South, Candice, and nothing is going to change that-- not the way you talk, or the way you look, nothing. You should be proud of where you're from, not ashamed of it." Amazingly, these words of advice made an impact on me then and continue to do so today. I cannot remember anything else she said to me during my adolescent years. Like most teenagers I rarely paid attention to my mother when she started handing out advice, but for some reason those words took root.

Although I reclaimed my Southern accent in high school, it wasn't until my senior year in college that I began to truly appreciate my Southern roots. In an American Studies class entitled "Literature and Film of the Contemporary South," taught by Dr. Jack Reese, I discovered that being Southern entitled me to much more than a slow drawl and a predilection for fried chicken and biscuits on Sunday afternoons. Through the words and stories of authors such as Lee Smith, Kaye Gibbons, Clyde Edgerton, and Eudora Welty, I learned that being Southern meant that I belonged to a rich heritage of people and culture, which being so unique characterized an entire region of the country as being a separate entity in and of itself.

When I decided to take Dr. Reese's class at the beginning of the spring semester during my junior year, I was not prepared for nor did I realize the tremendous impact the course would ultimately have on me both intellectually and emotionally. At the time, I was researching a possible College Scholars project topic in the field of

education. I was interested in learning more about how common classifications, such as "gifted," "remedial," and "learning disabled," impacted students' educational progress. Although I had always enjoyed reading a variety of books and novels, I did not expect in the midst of my educational research that in less than six months, two weeks after the fall semester began, I would abandon all of my current research to start all over again in the genre of Contemporary Southern Literature.

Perhaps the reason I was so captivated by the novels we read in Dr. Reese's class is the same reason I immediately embraced Scarlett O'Hara when I first saw *Gone with the Wind*--I could relate to the characters and their stories. As I read these novels, I was reminded of people that I knew--my friends, my family, and often myself. I began to realize that as a Southerner, I was firmly embedded in a culture that characterized my identity. My family was not isolated, but a patch in an intricately made quilt. Our ties to the land, our stubborn personalities, our traditions, and our voices were not merely family traits, but they were also steeped deeply in a place--the South.

My telephone bill during the fall semester of my senior year was evidence of my new-found excitement. It seemed as though every other day I was calling my mother in Chattanooga to tell her of the latest novel I had read and how it related to our family. I was like a child who felt the need to tell her mother everything she had learned at school that day. "Mother, we're reading this book *The Ponder Heart* in my Southern lit. class and I swear it's just like listening to one of those stories Granddad used to tell when he and

Uncle Basil would get together." Years after my mother had warned me against losing my Southern accent, I was finally following the second half of her advice. I was not only proud of being from the South, I was convinced that being from the South defined who I was.

Like my attraction to Scarlett O'Hara, I identified mostly with the female characters in the books that our class read. Many of these women lived much differently than I did, but they each had characteristics that I admired. They were intelligent, strong, stubborn, and uniquely feminine. These characters, conceived and developed by real Southern women, reminded me of my Granny, my Mamaw, my mother and her sisters, my aunts, my cousins, and my friends. Like most women in the South and even in the same families, they were all very different, but they all shared certain traits. And no, they did not all fit the stereotype that even I had once believed accurately depicted the perfect Southern woman.

As I began to more narrowly define the focus of my College Scholars project, I decided that I wanted to research how the Southern women depicted in Contemporary Southern novels differed so greatly from the traditional Scarlett O'Hara image. Through an arduous process of defining and then later redefining a number of preliminary topics, I finally decided to focus on novels dealing with three generations of women within the same family. In the beginning, I set few restrictions on the novels I would use: one, each novel must focus on the matrilineal line and all three generations must be represented; two, the author must be a woman; three, the three main female characters must be white; four, the novels must be classified as "contemporary," written in the second half of this

century. My reasoning for setting such restrictions was to narrow the focus of the paper and to insure a number of constant factors across the board. I began with only a few preconceived ideas of the similarities and themes I would find, based solely on my experiences and my relationships with my own mother and grandmother. The precise angle the paper would eventually take did not emerge until months after I began researching the topic.

With the help of Dr. Reese, I found four novels which matched my topic perfectly: *Charms for the Easy Life* written by Kaye Gibbons; Michael Lee West's *Crazy Ladies*; *Tending to Virginia* by Jill McCorkle; and the 1974 novel by Gail Godwin, *The Odd Woman*.

*Charms for the Easy Life*, published in 1993, is the simple, yet charming story of three Southern women living together and caring for one another on the outskirts of Raleigh, North Carolina. Margaret Birch narrates the adventures that she experiences with her mother Sophia Snow and her grandmother Charlie Kate during the first half of this century. Charlie Kate is a non-licensed doctor who with the help of her daughter and granddaughter cares for the poorer people in her neighborhood. She is also the matriarch of her small family and Margaret's moral barometer. It is the close relationship that Margaret shares with her grandmother that keeps her from leaving home to attend college, despite her extraordinary intelligence. Throughout the novel, men intermittently appear and reappear in the lives of these three women, but their loyalties remain at home, with each other.

Michael Lee West's novel *Crazy Ladies*, published in 1990, is set in the small town of Crystal Falls, Tennessee, where Clancy Jane

Jones and her twelve-year-old daughter Violet return home to live with Miss Gussie, Clancy Jane's mother. The family's stories of hardships, sibling rivalry, and coming of age are told in the voices of the novel's female characters--Miss Gussie, her daughters Dorothy and Clancy Jane, Dorothy's daughter Bitsy, Violet, Clancy Jane's daughter, and Queenie, the family's black maid. The novel begins in 1932 with Miss Gussie's murder of Sawyer Wentworth and continues to the year 1972. For forty years, Dorothy struggles with her jealousy of her sister Clancy Jane. Clancy Jane bears the deaths of both her first husband and her second daughter Augusta Dee and rides an emotional roller coaster from Louisiana to California. And the third-generation characters, Violet and Bitsy are forced to discover their own identities in the midst of their family's expectations and turmoil.

Published in 1987, Jill McCorkle's *Tending to Virginia* is the story of Virginia Suzanne Ballard. During a visit home to Saxapaw, North Carolina, Virginia experiences difficulties with her pregnancy and is forced to remain on her grandmother's sofa for a week. While Virginia is confined to her grandmother's apartment, unable to move without risking the loss of her baby, she is "tended" to by three generations of marvelous women--Grams, Aunt Lena, her mother Hannah, Aunt Madge, and her cousin Cindy. Their stories of past memories and family secrets entertain, comfort, and soothe Virginia, reminding her of what she loves and misses most about her family and home. Faced with the decision to leave her husband and remain with her family, Virginia is advised by her mother and grandmother that although there are parts of the past you must hold in your

memory, there are others that you must "let go" to leave room for what is new.

*The Odd Woman* by Gail Godwin is the story of Jane Clifford, a woman in her early thirties who is forced to return to her childhood home in North Carolina to attend the funeral of her beloved grandmother, Edith. During her journey home, Jane, who is in the middle of a two-year relationship with a married man, begins to look to the women in her family for the answers to her questions of life, love, and happiness and ultimately realizes that it is she who must make her own decisions.

Amidst the many different themes that arose from each of these novels and a combination of the four, one was strikingly obvious--the third-generation female character in each novel was remarkably different from both her mother and her grandmother. I was most interested in this theme because of my own status as a third-generation Southern woman. As I had recognized in my own family, the female characters in these novels seemed to evolve over a period of generations. Although the granddaughter was indeed a product of both her mother and grandmother, as well as her Southern culture, she experienced a metamorphosis in attitude, role, and character that neither her mother nor her grandmother experienced. Because of my interest in this specific theme and the abundance of supporting evidence available in each novel, I ultimately decided to focus on how the "new" Southern woman was different from her ancestors, despite her embeddedness in both Southern traditions and expectations.

The evolution of the Southern woman from lady of the manor to modern-day housewife is the topic of a number of books on Southern culture. Unfortunately, many of these books are more humorous than informative. During my research, I found books that did very little for dispelling the myths that surround Southern femaleness. One book that I found particularly funny, although at times insulting, was entitled *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* by Florence King. Ms. King admits on the first page of her book: "I did not interview anyone for this book, nor did I make a nuisance of myself at the public library" (7). Her confession buffers many of the blows she makes to both Southern men and women, but in my opinion does nothing for promoting Southern pride. With chapter titles such as "Build a Fence Around the South and You'd Have One Big Madhouse" and "Would Youall Be Good Enough to Excuse Me While I Have an Identity Crisis?", it is evident that while remotely addressing some of the South's issues Ms. King's first priority is to simply entertain her audience. However, amidst the good-humor are scattered some slightly intellectual observations on Southern womanhood. Ms. King states:

The cult of Southern womanhood endowed her [the Southern woman] with at least five totally different images and asked her to be good enough to adopt all of them. She is required to be frigid, passionate, sweet, bitchy, and scatterbrained--all at the same time. Her problems spring from the fact that she succeeds. (37)

More informative is the autobiography by Shirley Abbott entitled *WOMENFOLKS: Growing Up Down South*. This book is told from the perspective of a forty-something-year-old woman who was born in Arkansas, but currently lives in New York with her husband



and two daughters. In her book, Ms. Abbott recollects stories she remembers from her childhood such as riding in the family's green Chevrolet to the cemetery on summer afternoons with her mother, Aunt Vera, and Cousin June, listening to her elders' stories of dead relatives and past summers. In addition to her childhood memories, Ms. Abbott includes an informative history lesson on the first Scotch-Irish pioneers who settled in the South and also comments in detail on what she believes it means to grow up female in the South: "To grow up female in the South is to inherit a set of directives that warp one for life, if they do not actually induce psychosis. This is true for high-born ladies as well as for farm women" (3). She goes on to admit:

I grew up believing, though I could never have voiced it, that a woman might pose as garrulous and talky and silly and dotty, but at heart she was a steely, silent creature, with secrets no man could ever know, and she was always--always--stronger than any man. (3)

Ms. Abbott talks at length of the influences of both her mother and the other women in her family. It was they who upheld the traditions and retold the stories of her family's past, and most importantly, were the cornerstones of her family. Ms. Abbot also comments on the sisterhood of Southern women which she was introduced to by her mother. She says, "Next to motherhood, sisterhood is what they [Southern women] value most, taking an endless pleasure in the daily, commonplace society of one another that they never experience in male company" (167). Even as a child, she recognized this connection between her own mother and grandmother: "What my mother and father felt for each other

seemed natural enough to me. As I grew up, however, what was impenetrable to me was not their love but mother's love for her own mother" (159).

Ms. Abbott concludes her own story by explaining why so many Southern women, including herself, are now leaving the South. Her explanation encompasses much of what the third-generation characters in the aforementioned novels express through their own words and actions, their struggles and their defeats:

They run away from the ramshackle mythology of ladies and belles, virtuous Christian motherhood, and all the rest of it, sometimes in loathing but as often as not with a touch of regret for their own failure to measure up. By no means do all *bright* Southern women give up; some of the smartest and most serious of them stay in the South and manage to fit in, a source of puzzlement to those who cannot. (192)

Throughout my research I encountered several women, some whom I disliked, but most of whom I admired. I recognized my own grandmothers in Edith Barnstorff and Emily Roberts. I saw similarities between Kitty Sparks and my mother. And I identified with Margaret Birch, Violet Jones, and Virginia Turner Ballard. Over the past six months, I have adopted these women into my own family--laughing at their jokes, sharing in their joys, and feeling an ounce of their pain. During the completion of this project, I have learned a great deal not only about literature and the researching process, but also about myself. I am one of the third-generation Southern women I discuss in the following pages and like Margaret, Violet and Bitsy, Virginia, Cindy, Jane and her sister Emily, I may be a product of my past, but I am markedly different from the women

who have come before me. I am a "new" Southern woman and this is my story.

# *All in the Family*

## Chapter Two: Family Traits and Similarities

Although the "new" Southern woman is dramatically different from the Scarlett O'Hara stereotype of the traditional Southern Belle, she is indeed a product of her mother and grandmother who were often raised in this image. The "new" Southern woman, while attempting to break free from the cultural scripts of Southern femaleness, imitates her mother and grandmother in attitude and personality, both consciously and unconsciously. The similarities that all three of these women share may often seem irrelevant to their overall persons; however, their traits are the foundation on which each woman's individual actions are built. Not only do these ladies resemble one another physically, they also act similarly. Their actions are obviously very different, but the desire and personality traits that drive them to act as they do are often the same. Just as a daughter often inherits her mother's brown eyes, many of the third-generation characters in *Charms for the Easy Life*, *The Odd Woman*, *Tending to Virginia*, and *Crazy Ladies* also inherit their stubbornness, determination, and compassion from their mothers (and grandmothers.)

Margaret in *Charms for the Easy Life* recognizes the impact of her own inheritance by stating that "hurling oneself at a desire is a family trait, and has made convicts, scholars, lovers, and dope fiends out of us from way back" (25). However, not all of the characters' attributes are inherited; many of them are acquired. The environment in which these women live as children and in which

they mature contributes significantly to their personalities and outlooks on life. The ideas and opinions of the younger characters' mothers and grandmothers are, ironically, the most significant and influential part of this environment. For example, Margaret is taught by the words and actions of her mother and grandmother that education is vitally important. She accepts this conviction and not only finishes high school, but develops a love for medicine and continues to assist Charlie Kate with her medical procedures, this despite the apathetic attitude most of her neighbors and fellow Southerners had toward education during the early 1900's. Margaret also gains an appreciation for the written word from her mother and grandmother, which adds to her academic success and eventually leads her to Tom, her future fiancé. Despite these ultimate outcomes, Margaret explains that reading was simply a passion she shared with Sophia and Charlie Kate:

In our house, the point of reading and learning was neither to impress outsiders nor to get a job or a husband, nothing like that. It had nothing to do with anybody but the three of us. We shared a curiosity about the world that couldn't be satisfied in any other way.  
(116-17)

In addition to her passions, the majority of Margaret's moral code is developed according to what Sophia and particularly her grandmother, Charlie Kate, have said to be right and wrong. All three of these women, for example, have a racial tolerance that is uncommon in the South. Margaret is taught by Charlie Kate's disregard of color in her patients that racism is wrong. She is also encouraged by her mother to volunteer during the war: "My mother insisted that my grandmother and I do Red Cross work with her,

saying our mental health would deteriorate with so much time spent inside the house" (130).

These women also have many of the same idiosyncrasies that at first glance appear to be trite or non-important, but do indeed have a bearing on their individual behavior. Margaret inherits an emotional tie to her hometown and the Pasquotank River, much like the other women do in her family. Following in her mother's and grandmother's footsteps, she develops a love for medicine and helping people as well. And at the death of her grandmother, she also goes through Charlie Kate's ritual of covering all of the mirrors in the house with bed sheets and stopping the hands on all of the clocks. When she is finished, she looks at her grandmother lying on the sofa and says, "'There. See how I knew what to do?'" (254). Margaret recognizes that much of what she knows she learned from simply watching her grandmother for many years.

Jane Clifford in *The Odd Woman* also looks to the women in her family "for answers to life" (29). She "investigated and ruminated over the women she had sprung from, searched for models in persons who had made good use of their lives, admirable women who, even if not dramatic, might guide her through their examples" (30). At the age of thirty-two, Jane attempts to model her behavior on that of her mother and grandmother, despite her desire to break free from the ideals of Southern womanhood. Her "obsession with decorum" (12) spawns directly from her grandmother Edith, "the perfect Southern lady. She was elegant, snobbish, beautiful to the very end" (62). On numerous occasions, Jane unconsciously asks herself, "What would Edith have done?" (48) in reference to her own

actions in uncomfortable or questionable situations. Kitty, Jane's mother, is also a perfect example of Jane's perception of how a lady should act: "Kitty was the belle of the family, the archetypal belle. She had made elusiveness, soft gentle evasiveness--of persons and facts which threatened to come too close--her style" (100). Jane illustrates this same trait in her own relationships although she fails to realize that she herself is threatened by intimacy.

At the death of Jane's grandmother, Jane's friend Gerda attempts to console her over the telephone. During their conversation, Gerda makes the telling comment, "'Your poor mother, too. Your psyches were terribly bound up with Edith'" (42). Gerda seems to understand that both Jane and Kitty are intensely influenced by Edith, to the point of seemingly sharing the same mind. This type of connection is not as blatantly obvious to Jane, yet she exhibits it nonetheless. Jane unconsciously embraces many of the attitudes that her grandmother expressed when she was younger. For example, throughout the novel, Jane reveals that she often feels detached from her partner during love-making:

She often made up prayers when making love...With James, her fiancé in England, she had strained so hard to abandon herself, and often prayed to help herself along. She had prayed for wild and dramatic transformations which would change her utterly... (249-50)

This feeling of detachment may stem from her grandmother's laments to a young Jane that sex is merely a duty every wife must endure. In addition to this revelation, Edith ingrains the story of Jane's Great-Aunt Cleve into her young and impressionable mind. Edith declares that Cleve, who followed an unknown actor to New

York City, allowed herself to become pregnant, and met an early demise after the birth of her child at the hands of her young lover, is an example of the ill effects of sexual impropriety: "You had your choice: a disastrous ending with a Villain; a satisfactory ending with a Good Man. The message was simple, according to Edith" (29).

Jane also inherits a string of characteristics from her mother and grandmother: she is an insomniac, like her mother, "a veteran insomniac of many years" (10), and her grandmother; she enjoys reading, and similar to her mother, who is an English teacher at an all-girls private school, Jane teaches English literature at a Midwestern university; Jane also demonstrates the often self-deprecating faithfulness that runs in her family throughout her two-year relationship with a married man; and like Kitty and Edith, Jane is able to talk more candidly, "getting down to it without fear of the consequences" (132), with other women as opposed to men.

This ability to converse freely among other women is a common inherited trait among all the characters in the four novels under discussion. The novel *Tending to Virginia* illustrates the natural, lucid, and lyrical way in which Southern women simply talk and in doing so orally preserve their family histories. The Pearson women do not consciously act as family historians; however, they unconsciously preserve their past for the younger generations through their stories. Instinctively, when the women of this family get together, they begin to talk--about their husbands, their children, the time when so-and-so did this and what's-his-name said that, and "Oh, those greens are looking great this year," and so on and so on. During Virginia's wedding reception, her husband Mark asks her



mother, "'Does this mean I'm in the secret club, now?' 'What club?' Hannah asked and laughed because she had never been a joiner. 'You know,' Mark said, 'the club that meets at your mother's house. All the women. When a man comes in it gets quiet'" (72-3).

Talking is the means by which these women entertain, comfort, advise, and love one another. When Virginia is forced to remain on the sofa in her grandmother's living room for an entire week, the women in her family "tend" to her by passing the time with their stories. Even while something important is taking place, many of these women think not of it at that moment but of how they will retell the happenings of that event in the weeks to come. At her husband's funeral, Emily thinks of the stories she will tell Virginia about her grandfather: "She sat through that service and concentrated her mind on Ginny Sue, pulled that child up on her lap and held her there, and while the preacher talked of how good James was, she thought of all the things that she'd tell Ginny Sue" (57).

These stories seem to bind Virginia to her past and her family. She experiences the same feelings of homesickness that her mother and grandmother admit to feeling when they were younger. Grams says, "'Sometimes I feel so alone and what I'm lonely for is my mother'" (177). Virginia also struggles with this loneliness, and while staying with her grandmother during her difficult pregnancy, she announces that she plans to stay in Saxapaw. Grams gives her the advice that she says her mother gave to her and that she gave to Virginia's mother: "'A person's got to know when to let go. You can hold on tight but it don't change the fact that sooner or later you've got to let go'" (299).

Virginia also inherits some of the guilt her own mother suffers. Both of these women feel that they must struggle to be perfect; they both set expectations for themselves and feel they must meet these expectations. When they fall short of this goal, they are much harder on themselves than are the other members of the family, although both Hannah and Virginia accuse their relatives of placing them on a pedestal. During the ladies' conversation on the afternoon of a horrible storm, Hannah tells her daughter, "'You talk like my life has been easy and perfect, like I've never had a problem'" (266). She goes on to tell Virginia and the rest of her family, "'I've had my share of problems... And I've made my share of mistakes and don't you ever forget it'" (266). Virginia similarly feels that she is always expected to act perfectly and earlier in the novel mimics her mother's sentiments: "Cindy can get away with murder: married, divorced, married, divorced, looking for a third and all anybody ever says is 'doesn't surprise me,' whereas Virginia can't get away with anything, never has been able to" (24).

Bitsy in *Crazy Ladies* also inherits an array of characteristics from her mother which shape her behavior throughout the course of the novel. Like Margaret, in *Charms for the Easy Life*, Bitsy's environment, dominated by her mother Dorothy, is most influential in shaping her personality. From an early age, Bitsy is trained in the traditional image of the Southern belle. Her mother emphasizes the importance of grace, charm, aloofness, and hidden intelligence: "She said the key to everything was beauty and good grades. Not to mention *savoir-faire*. You had to have that" (122). Bitsy goes through adolescence with this image of the Southern lady ingrained

into her mind. When her eighth-grade classmates choose her cousin Violet as room chairman over Bitsy, she immediately perceives her defeat as the result of her own insufficiencies: "I should have been nicer, prettier, kinder, smarter" (129). Also like her mother, Bitsy seems to resign herself to the role of wife and mother, inheriting Dorothy's self-imposed limitations. She does not aspire to succeed beyond the social scene of her hometown of Crystal Springs, Tennessee.

Because of the importance her immediate family places on physical beauty, Bitsy learns many of the do's and don'ts of applying make-up and hair dye from her mother as well. Ironically, her cousin Violet never wears make-up. Like her mother, Clancy Jane, Violet projects a much plainer image than her cousin. Because Clancy Jane does not desire to fit the traditional Southern belle image, she does not raise her daughter to conform to it either. Although the two girls live next door to one another and eventually become close friends, they are much more individually influenced by their mothers than each other. For example, Violet is more racially tolerant than her cousin Bitsy, because Clancy Jane is more racially tolerant than her sister Dorothy.

Violet is also influenced by her grandmother, Miss Gussie, most likely because she lives with her grandmother during her teen years. When Violet visits her mother in Arizona in the early 1970's, Clancy Jane realizes that in many ways, Violet is more like Miss Gussie than she is: "'You're strong, Violet. You really are. You're like my mother. She can stand anything'" (220). Whereas Clancy Jane instinctively runs away from her problems, both physically and mentally, Violet,

like her grandmother, faces her own problems, searching for solutions rather than excuses.

Clearly, all of the third-generation characters in each of these novels are products of both their mothers and grandmothers. They resemble one another in appearance, attitude, and personality. However, despite their similarities, the "new" Southern woman is unquestionably different from the other women in her family. It is often these differences that are highlighted in the novels rather than the similarities. More often than not, it is much easier to recognize how the third-generation characters rebel against the actions of their mothers and grandmothers rather than emulate them. Yet it is the characteristics that these "new" Southern women learn from their ancestors that give them the strength and the fortitude to break free from the traditional expectations of Southern femaleness and to become their own breed of women. Recognizing this, it is important to note first these family characteristics before beginning to discuss how the "new" Southern woman is different from her mother and grandmother.

# *The Evolution of Man*

## Chapter Three: Changing Attitudes

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the "new" Southern woman and her ancestors is her opinion of men and the role she allows (or forbids) them to play in her life. In *Charms for the Easy Life*, *Tending to Virginia*, *Crazy Ladies*, and *The Odd Woman*, female attitudes toward men change for each of the three generations of female characters. The women of the first generation, with the exception of Charlie Kate in *Charms for the Easy Life*, appear to designate all men as their protectors. Often this protection is based on financial dependence, forcing the women to assume subservient roles in the relationships. The daughters of these women seem to rebel against this male-dominated family structure. The women of the second generation are much more manipulative and controlling of men; however, they also seem to be more emotionally dependent upon them. Rather than financial protection, these women seek personal validation from the men in their lives. Conversely, their daughters--the third generation--appear to view all men as natural adversaries. Men are no longer considered protectors by the "new" Southern woman, nor are they viewed as prizes to be won by womanly wiles. This third generation of women claims the freedom their grandmothers and mothers did not have and displays a natural distrust of men.

The women of the first generation typically assume a secondary role in their relationships with men. This type of relationship, in which the man is considered the unquestionable head

of the household and the woman is responsible for the daily chores and the children is often described as traditional in the South.

Because the tradition is so ingrained, most of these women do not feel confined or inhibited by their subservient roles. Despite often being denied the opportunity to make decisions or to exercise their own free will, these women seem to assume this role naturally, often explaining that this is the role that God intended for them to fill.

The Southern white male typically has been stereotyped in literature and other media as the dominant figure among his family, often bawdy and undemocratic but loyal to his wife and children and a hard worker in the fields. Most of the first-generation men in these novels are portrayed this way as well. Their wives regard them as their protectors, both physically and mentally. The primary responsibility of the men of this generation is to protect their wives and families economically. Financial stability is often the reason, in fact, that many of these couples marry. Even Edith in *The Odd Woman*, despite her seemingly storybook relationship with husband Hans Barnstorff, explains to her granddaughter Jane, "Love is not everything in a marriage" (112). The importance of this ability to provide for one's family is illustrated in *Crazy Ladies* when Miss Gussie introduces her late husband in the first chapter of the novel by saying, "Charlie wasn't a farmer. He was a teller at Citizens' Bank, and he was proud to bring home fourteen dollars every week. Before the Depression he'd had hopes of advancing to cashier" (3). Ironically, Miss Gussie does not first mention Charlie's more husbandly characteristics, such as the fathering of her two children

or their romantic love for one another. Charlie is first a provider, the financial protector of the family, and secondly her husband.

Ironically, these relationships are typically the most successful among the three generations because the roles of both the husband and the wife are so clearly defined and unquestioned by either the man or the woman. It appears that the reason Charlie Kate's marriage ends prematurely is that she is not satisfied playing the role of the traditional housewife and her husband feels threatened by her aspirations. Several years after her parents' separation, Sophia explains to her daughter Margaret, "He [her father] would sit there and sigh and shake his head, watching her [Charlie Kate] become better and better at what she loved. He admired her, I think, but all the same, he couldn't bear it" (24).

More representative of this generation's relationships are those of Edith and Hans Barnstorff in *The Odd Woman* and Emily and James Roberts in *Tending to Virginia*. Years after her husband's death, Emily silently remembers how she and James would sail in the waters of the Saxapaw River:

Years and years ago, passing on the shore, and she could not take her eyes off of him, that strong dark face, though tired by then and, behind that face and those eyes, the blood that the doctor said could go sky high if he didn't watch it. She watched it for him; she would have crawled inside his body and held that rush of blood back if she could've. (54-55)

Later, when Virginia asks her grandmother, "'Were you ever unhappy? Were you ever sorry that you married Gramps?'" Emily replies: "'No, James never caused me to hurt and I knew I had found the best, found the best this world could offer out to me'" (140-41).

Edith Barnstorff similarly tells her granddaughter Jane about her late husband, "'Hans was a good man and he took good care of me'" (112).

Rather than embrace this traditional role of Southern homemaker, the daughters of these women appear to rebel against their own male-dominated family structure and assume a more controlling role in their relationships with men. This change is not so much a result of their disapproval of their mothers' subservience, but more a result of the times in which they live. Each of these women is given the opportunity to postpone marrying, unlike her mother. It is no longer necessary to marry early for financial reasons. Because many of these women delay marrying until their twenties, they have several years to experience a number of love interests. Three of these women, Kitty, Sophia, and Clancy Jane, also lose their husbands early in their marriages to sickness or the wars, World War II and Vietnam. Because of their situations, these women are forced into the dating game once again after the birth of their first child. The women of the second generation are often older and demand more attention from their suitors than did their mothers. These women are extremely conscious of their looks and depend on their *Southern charm* to woo the hearts of young men. They usually have more than one boyfriend at a time and rely on them for emotional support and validation.

In three of the four novels, excluding *Tending to Virginia*, the second-generation women are characterized as flippant and fickle in their relationships with men. These otherwise intelligent women are considered to lose all common sense during their courtships and invariably fall for the "wrong" man. Most often this characterization



is made by the women's mothers, who do not approve of their daughters' choices of suitors nor their apparent eagerness for male attention and companionship. Margaret in *Charms for the Easy Life* explains that this is the reason her grandmother did not even attend her only daughter's wedding:

The person who really was not there was my grandmother, who saw through all things and knew that my mother was marrying this man because he was witty, clever, and good-looking and because he didn't turn back the affection that my mother heaped on him. (30)

She goes on to say that "My grandmother encouraged my mother in all endeavors except when it came to her choice of suitors" (30).

Neither is Kitty in *The Odd Woman* considered to be an excellent judge of character in men: "Jane's mother, Kitty, . . . had eloped twice. Both times with 'questionable' men of her own choice, if nobody else's" (29). Hannah in *Tending to Virginia* does not undergo this scrutiny from Emily most likely because she assumes a more traditional role in her relationship with husband Ben, one that, not surprisingly, is very similar to her mother's role.

Dorothy in *Crazy Ladies*, in turn, uses dating to both frustrate her mother and to gain a fraction of Miss Gussie's attention away from her younger sister, Clancy Jane. Miss Gussie remembers:

Clancy Jane was too young to have a real date--none that I knew of, to be exact--but Dorothy had plenty. After the boys brought her home, I searched real quiet like for danger signs. Smeared lipstick. Hair all messed up. Or else combed too neatly. Wrinkles in her skirts and dresses.

Dorothy had every single solitary sign. (41)

It seems, then, that the women of the second generation often use dating to assume some control in their lives; however, this control is often over their own mothers rather than the men that they date.

This power struggle between mother and daughter rises to a new level when the daughter begins to date a second time, after the death of her first husband. In the three novels *The Odd Woman*, *Crazy Ladies*, and *Charms for the Easy Life*, all three generations of women live together in the same house after the death of both the daughter's first husband and her father. This arrangement begins to emulate that of a two-parent household, with the grandmother assuming the bulk of the responsibility and care for her granddaughter. Because her daughter's choice of suitors now affects not only herself but also her child, the grandmother becomes even more concerned with the appropriateness of her daughter's choices. The grandmother assumes the role of mother to both her daughter and her granddaughter, and instead of treating her daughter like the adult that she is, the grandmother typically treats her as if she were merely the eldest of her two children. Edith's concern that Kitty is carousing with an unfit man leads her to follow her daughter inconspicuously on her dates with Ray, dragging little Jane behind her:

She led Jane round the slowly darkening streets of quiet neighborhoods till she found what she was looking for. She always managed to come up on it from behind: a 1947 Chevy coupe, usually parked under some trees, away from the streetlights, with two people in it. Once having spotted it, she recoiled dramatically, as though it might contaminate both of them. Later, when Jane was supposed to be asleep, she would hear the women arguing fiercely, trying to keep their voices low. "But

how could you? He's twelve years younger. His people are ordinary." "But I love him." "Oh, you love him. You loved everybody." (118)

Charlie Kate and Sophia reenact this same argument after Sophia begins to show interest in a new suitor, Richard Baines:

All the way to the car and all the way home, my grandmother and mother fought as I had never seen them fight before. They fixed their theme early and stuck to it: There is a man lurking. What are we going to do about it? My grandmother said mainly that my mother didn't need a man, that she had been happier without one and would *remain* happy that way. My mother responded with variations of "What makes you so sure? Haven't you been looking at me close enough to tell I'm actually lonely?" (91)

In each novel, it is the subject of men that arouses the greatest point of contention between the women of the first and second generations.

Ironically, whereas the first-generation women seem to function as the emotional backbone for their families, the second-generation women are much freer with their emotions and often use them as a means of manipulation, either to entice men or to make them feel guilty. Both Dorothy and Clancy Jane illustrate this method of manipulation in *Crazy Ladies*. At the young age of sixteen, Clancy Jane realizes that in order to sway her husband from the arms of his clandestine French lover, she must resort to desperate means of manipulation. After Hart, her husband, leaves her a note which reads, "Dear Clancy Jane, I have fell in love with Laverne" (52), she decides to dress in her nicest dress, put on her eyeliner and lipstick, ask her neighbor to baby-sit Violet, and then she drives to the local fishing bar *The Blue Marlin*, where she knows Hart and Laverne will

be late one evening. Despite her overt attempts to flirt with all of the bar regulars, her plan to win Hart back with jealousy does not work. Furious, she leaves the bar in tears and decides to resort to plan number two--suicide. Although Clancy Jane begins to doubt her rash decision as she dangles helplessly from the bridge, she accidentally falls into the water anyway, luckily only breaking a few bones. At the hospital, she awakes to Hart sitting beside her bed:

"Where's Frenchy?" I stared at him, hoping he'd get a good look at my banged-up face.

"Don't you worry about her," he said. "That's all over now. It's all over."

"I don't know," I said, narrowing my eyes. I didn't trust him.

"Oh Clancy Jane." Tears filled his dark eyes. "You could've killed yourself, girl. You know I love you. You shouldn't have done it." (58).

Clancy Jane then smiles to herself, knowing that she has won their little game of cat and mouse. Dorothy, Clancy Jane's older sister, similarly tricks her husband into staying with her with strategically arranged, but temporary, bouts of insanity and emotional outbursts. After Albert, her husband, moves out of the house following twenty years of marriage, Dorothy also attempts to commit suicide. Unfortunately, her scheme results in an extended visit to the insane asylum, not reconciliation.

Obviously, these second-generation women do not wholeheartedly accept the same position in life which their mothers claimed; however, they do submit to men by often bending to society's expectations of Southern femaleness. The husband continues to be the head of the household, making decisions on behalf of the entire family. He is still the primary economic provider

for his family, while his wife, if she works outside of the home at all, is confined to "woman's work," such as teaching or sewing. And, although the women often believe they have control over their relationships, the men hold the ultimate authority, because their wives are so emotionally dependent upon them.

Their daughters, the "new" Southern women, however, reject all of these stereotypes and often take great pride in not fitting the images of either their grandmothers or their mothers. Rather than desire companionship from men, the "new" Southern woman seems to elude it. Not only does she postpone marriage, but in many instances she either runs away from the possibility of it or avoids it all-together. Both Virginia in *Tending to Virginia* and Jane in *The Odd Woman* end months-long engagements with their fiancés because of their feelings of "being closed in, of being taken over" (Godwin 391). And after hearing of her cousin's engagement shortly after high school graduation, Violet in *Crazy Ladies* declares, "Me, I was going to college, and I didn't care if I ever got married" (212). Margaret in *Charms for the Easy Life* also postpones marriage because of her desire to remain at home with her grandmother. The "new" Southern woman's relationships with men are often adversarial. She does not view them as protectors or validators but as competitors--competing for her opportunities, her attention, her education, her freedom, and her right to live her life as she chooses.

This drastic new attitude representative of the "new" Southern woman seems to be caused by either one or a combination of the following explanations. Perhaps the "new" Southern woman sees her grandmother's and mother's relationships with men as flawed or

inhibiting because of the men's domineering role, and she recoils from this type of relationship. Perhaps she unjustly compares her relationships with men to her romanticized version of her grandparents' "perfect" marriage; her grandmother contributes to this false idea of a "perfect love" by romanticizing her own marriage after her husband's death. Perhaps the "new" Southern woman feels pressure from the "outside world" to reject the traditional role of homemaker and mother. Also important, the third-generation woman has other means of asserting her independence from her family than merely by marrying and moving out of her childhood home. She has opportunities that her grandmother and mother did not have, such as education and different types of employment. The "new" Southern woman no longer must rely, then, on a man to provide her with a meaningful passage from childhood to adulthood.

Although this third generation of women experiences a great deal of anxiety over male-female relationships, many of them do eventually either marry or become romantically involved with a man. However, their anxieties persist into these relationships and often cause them to distrust, become apathetic toward, or feel unsatisfied with their partners. Often these feelings originate in the couple's inability to equal the passion and "perfectness" of the women's grandparents' marriages. This comparison is often made because the grandmother is typically the granddaughter's point of reference on matters of right and wrong, and both women typically romanticize the former's marriage because of her husband's earlier death. Years after her father's death, Kitty recognizes that her mother has grown to love him more than when her father was alive:

"Edith's husband, Hans, had died thirty years ago. Kitty had told Jane that Edith had fallen truly in love with him after he died" (Godwin 86). This tendency to remember only the good and forget all of the bad is natural, but also leads to an unrealistic, idealistic image of the marriage which the granddaughter tries hopelessly to emulate.

Virginia echoes this sentiment: "'Gram's life has been perfect,' Ginny Sue said. 'I hope I'm like Gram when I get old.' And Hannah did manage to bite her tongue on that one, to bite down on the bad times that Ginny chose to ignore" (McCorkle 72). Virginia's inability to be perfect like Gram results, not surprisingly, in her dissatisfaction with her own relationships. Similarly, in *The Odd Woman*, during a heated argument with her friend, Gerda, Jane is accused of attempting to mold her own life to fit her grandmother's memories:

"You are following in Edith's footsteps. You told me all about it, your favorite family myth--how she went to that Fourth of July fireworks and all the vulgar noises and all the common people were just too much for her. So she fainted, right in front of the very man who would take her away from it all. Oh, I have watched your eyes light up every time you tell that story, how she told Hans she thought life was a disease, and he said, 'Let me protect you from it.'" (238)

The third generation of women is also told not only by their grandmothers, but also throughout their education, that the idea of perfect love is attainable. Jane struggles with this concept throughout her adult life. She is continually unhappy in her serious relationships with men, because none of them fits the image she has read about over and over again in her nineteenth-century novels. When she returns home to attend her grandmother's funeral, she talks to her mother about her desires to find "that kind of love which

provides such energies" (176). Kitty responds to her daughter somewhat patronizingly, "You're living in myths, Jane, to expect such things!" (177). Kitty goes on to tell her daughter:

"The trouble with myths," said Kitty, "is that they leave out so much. They leave out all the loose ends, all those messy, practical details that make living less than idyllic."

"Listen. There was a time when I wanted every one of the things you want. I wanted it all. I wanted love. I wanted a career. I wanted everything eternally beautiful, and with no compromise. I wanted a kind of marriage I knew my parents had not had: a marriage of passion *and* esteem."

"But nothing synchronized." (177-78)

Obviously, because of this dissatisfaction, there are more divorces and broken relationships among the third generation than among the first and second generations. Bitsy in *Crazy Ladies* divorces her husband Meathead only a year after they marry despite her unsuccessful attempts to fit the image of the Southern woman her mother ingrained into her. Cindy in *Tending to Virginia* also goes through two divorces. It is apparent to Cindy that the standards of faithfulness have changed between her grandmother's and her generations: "'If I had lived when Grandma Tessy did,' Cindy says, 'then Charles and I would've stayed together. We would have made it work'" (256-57).

This third generation of women has claimed the freedom their mothers and grandmothers did not have and has asserted it over the men in their lives. Their relationships with men are dramatically different from the stereotypical ideal of the Southern family which their grandmothers fit. They reject their mothers' emotional



dependence on men just as they reject their grandmothers' economic dependence on men. Men to the third-generation woman are considered to be adversaries, not protectors or validators. It is this difference among the female characters in these novels that is the most apparent and most easily recognizable. Their opinions about men and the roles they are allowed to assume in the women's lives evolve dramatically over the course of three generations.

# *Conflicting Allegiances*

## Chapter Four: Integration of the Past and the Present

In her later years, Ellen Glasgow admitted that despite her literary success she had personally failed to "transcend completely a sense that the self within was split between conflicting allegiances" (Ekman 9). Although Miss Glasgow was born in 1873 and raised in the genteel tradition of the South, her admission of being torn between the conventional expectations of her aristocratic Virginian family and her desire to break free from them could easily mask as the confession of a late-twentieth century Southern woman. This failure to fully integrate the two separate selves, characteristic of the "new" Southern woman, is a constant and overt theme in the four novels *The Odd Woman*, *Charms for the Easy Life*, *Tending to Virginia*, and *Crazy Ladies*. In each of these novels, the female characters of the third generation experience a lack of self-fulfillment because of their inability to marry successfully their involvement in the modern, often deemed man's, world with their traditional Southern upbringing.

This generation's entrance into the modern world is often characterized by a move from the homestead or even the South as a region. However, as with the character of Jane Clifford in Gail Godwin's *The Odd Woman*, fleeing the geographic confines of the South does not guarantee the dissolution of its embedded societal expectations. After failing to become a product of the modern world by physically immersing one's self in it, the protagonists of the third generation often discover that they must struggle to transcend

mentally the psychological boundaries of the cultural scripts of Southern femaleness.

Despite Jane's attempt to escape these cultural scripts by physically leaving the South and moving to a midwestern university town, she cannot stop judging herself by the standards that have been defined by her culture. She often uses her grandmother and mother, both of whom she considers to be examples of "the perfect Southern lady" (62), as models of how to act in awkward situations:

What would Edith have done? Canceled the lunch, of course. Her decision would be based simply on what "tradition" expected of her. It would be written out in some etiquette book, copyrighted about 1890.

And Kitty? Canceled the lunch, of course. When in doubt, Kitty made a rule of choosing renunciation. (48)

Because Jane is the first woman in her family to attempt to live outside the South and to assume this role of modern woman, there are no behavioral examples or set rules for her to follow. Although she makes a conscious effort to play this new role, she unconsciously models her behavior on that of the women in her family and, henceforth, the "Southern lady" stereotype, perpetuating the image from which she struggles to break free.

The unsettling idea that Southern women are predestined for a certain fate because of such societal expectations is certainly present throughout *The Odd Woman*. During an intimate conversation with her daughter, Kitty verbalizes the frustration both she and Jane feel at being torn between personal aspirations and these predetermined roles:

We are products, we are prisoners of our times, little Jane. Even your great novels will bear me out on this:

look at the care in which a good Victorian novel first sets up the environment around the characters. I think I was one of those people who have the misfortune to grow up with one foot in one era and the other foot in the next. I wanted to write books, but my body got in the way; yet I wanted my babies, when they came. There were certain times I saw, almost like a vision, the virtue of selfishness, but, you see, I was brought up to believe woman's best virtue was that of renouncing herself. (178)

And to her mother, Jane responds in wistful agreement, "Sometimes I think those persons raised in the interstices of *Zeitgeists* are the ones most punished" (178).

Although Kitty denounces time and the era in which she was born for her fated lot as wife and mother, she also recognizes the importance one's environment has on such expectations. And for Jane, it is the environment in which she was raised, the complex frameworks of family, region, and culture, that she struggles to transcend. Her trial, which is often submerged in her own consciousness, comes to the surface each time she returns to her home and is forced to face the two conflicting parts of her self-identity: "Each homecoming for Jane amounts to a psychological test: she must fight to resist her family's image of her as their 'same old Jane,' raised with the cultural ideals of the South, and affirm the image of herself as an independent woman seeking new ways of self-definition" (Xie 72). Looking out the window as her airplane lands in her hometown, she sees an all-too familiar scene: her family "waiting for her to come back to them, expecting her to come back, never doubting she had any choice but to fall back from the sky and into their nets of family and region and social standing and--most compelling weave of all--their image of her, Jane, their Jane" (89).

She bares her own confession of being torn between two "conflicting allegiances" by admitting, "I turn into an anachronism every time I come home. I start measuring myself by standards thirty, fifty, a hundred years old" (137).

Unlike Jane, Margaret in *Charms for the Easy Life* remains in the South to live with her grandmother and mother despite their attempts to sway her decision. Being raised by two strong-willed and intelligent women, both with careers, in the first half of the twentieth century, Margaret does not have the traditional cultural scripts to accommodate. Since childhood, she has been taught the value of education and encouraged to develop her own identity by her grandmother. Because of the contemporary influences of Charlie Kate and Sophia, Margaret already exhibits the behavior and mind-set of the "new" Southern woman despite her physical embeddedness in the South. However, she discovers that other people continue to hold her to the standards of the "Southern lady" stereotype and cannot accept her more modern ideals and behavior.

During a double date with Sophia and Richard Baines, her mother's fiancé, Margaret's companion, a Yale graduate, mimics the opinion of many Southerners and Northerners alike:

Smiling sweetly at the young man, she [Sophia] said, "You know, Margaret's planning to attend Wellesley next term."

Although I was dying to ask her how she had narrowed the list down for me, I stayed quiet to wait for his response. He looked right at me, no shame at all, and asked whether I thought that was appropriate.

What he meant was clear to my mother and me. He was asking whether it was appropriate for a middle-class

Southern girl with no pedigree and no private tutelage to aspire to such a thing. (134)

Charlie Kate and Sophia both realize that Margaret will have a more difficult time escaping the biases and societal expectations of what a Southern woman should be if she remains in the South; however, because of the overwhelming affection Margaret holds for her grandmother, she refuses to leave home:

I had lain awake many nights and thought about this, how all the best schools were far from home. It wasn't that I imagined myself alone on a campus where nobody was familiar to me except characters in books I had already read. That vision didn't concern me. But when I saw myself peeking through the window of my mother's house, my grandmother and her without me, getting ready to go out on a house call or walking back in tired and bloodstained, I could barely breathe. The only way I could make the anxiety abate was to remind myself that I didn't have to go anywhere. I could get all the education I needed or wanted, for the time being, at home. (116)

Her struggle becomes that of a "new" Southern woman living in the midst of old ideals and prejudices, unable and unwilling to leave her geographical confines because of an emotional tie to that past.

Virginia in *Tending to Virginia* similarly longs to stay at home in part because of her emotional tie to her grandmother. However, she experiences this homesickness after leaving the nest and assuming her role as modern woman. Like Jane in *The Odd Woman*, Virginia is the first woman in her family to leave her hometown of Saxapaw, North Carolina, and she also experiences the uncertainty and anxieties of pioneering a new territory. She is a wife and soon-to-be mother who teaches art to elementary students in a town two hours from her childhood home. Despite her seemingly secure lot in

life, Virginia begins to question the rightness of her choices during the final months of her pregnancy when she discovers that Mark, her husband, ended his first marriage because his wife aborted the baby he wanted to have. This truth is revealed only months before Virginia and Mark are to move to Richmond, Virginia, several hours from Saxapaw. Confused, angry, and longing for the familiarity of home, Virginia returns to Saxapaw on a whim one summer afternoon to take refuge in the comfort of her grandmother's living room.

Virginia's affection toward her grandmother is one reason for her desire to remain in or near Saxapaw; however, perhaps more characteristic of the "new" Southern woman is her desire to return home, "where the history and knowledge is constant" (17), because of the security she finds in having a script to follow there. At home, Virginia knows that certain constants remain intact, unlike her ever-evolving role as a modern woman. Her past, and the people with whom she associates with it, provide her with a solid foundation; her future, on the other hand, as she sees it is wavering:

And she won't count on it, can't count on anything except what she already knows, the future so unknown, looming like a big dead-end billboard, temporarily blank white with no clue of the end result. And what she does know--the quiet coolness of her grandmother's old house, Lena's laughter, the rhythmic whirr of her mother's sewing machine--makes her so homesick. (10)

Virginia thus gravitates toward the familiar to ease the anxiety that overwhelms her as she faces certain change. Not only is she embarking on motherhood, a new role for her, but she is also facing a physical break from her home. And it is this impending move away

from her family that signifies her break with the past and the inevitable struggle that accompanies it.

Virginia also struggles to establish a positive self-image and to define her own identity amidst the conflicting, predetermined female roles she feels she must play. Her pregnancy is a great source of both physical and mental discomfort for Virginia. She abhors the image of herself in the mirror, fitting the stereotype of the extremely maternal Southern woman. "Pregnant. Barefoot and pregnant. A derogatory connotation, a picture of a female clad in a gunnysack with a brood of runny-nosed children and a distended belly just like her own" (7). Virginia does not feel the maternal instincts that she has been told are natural and inherent to motherhood. This lack of feeling coupled with her sudden unhappiness with her marriage leaves Virginia feeling empty and guilty that she has failed to aspire to what was expected of her, to what she expected of herself:

She always imagined a little lacy apron over a cute little maternity smock with gleaming tile counters in her kitchen, loaf after loaf of home-baked bread cooling, when the front door opened and someone said, "Hey Honey, I'm home," and swept her back in a kiss and told her how beautiful and wonderful she was. But, that was only part of the dream because she was also a professional woman of independent means who toured the country with her paintings, who on a whim would reupholster the furniture in an array of watercolors in the spring and warm rich plaids in the winter when a blazing fire filled the fireplace that she does not have, and she sat in a worn cherry rocker and knitted just as she has imagined her great-grandmother, the other Virginia Suzanne. (34)

Because she has yet to actualize her "superwoman" ideal, a successful combination of both the traditional Southern homemaker



and her more contemporary urban professional identity, Virginia considers herself a failure, despite the virtual impossibility of the dual role. Virginia's tendency to romanticize the past also leads to her disillusionment because she continually compares herself to both her seemingly "perfect" mother and grandmother, much like Jane does in *The Odd Woman*. "'Gram's life has been perfect,' Ginny Sue said. 'I hope I'm like Gram when I get old.'" (72). In addition to her desire to be like her grandmother when she gets older, Virginia also struggles to mirror the perfect image she has assigned to her own mother. "'You've always done things exactly right. You wore white when you got married and it meant something. You don't smoke, you had two children, a station wagon, a business that was all your own, and you've never been in therapy'" (265-66).

Bitsy in *Crazy Ladies* spends her adolescence acting the part that her mother, Dorothy, assures her will result in a happy life only to discover later that her mother's traditional ideals do not fit in her more modern world. In the eighth grade, Bitsy looks forward to following her (or her mother's) plan: "And Mummie said I would be a cheerleader and wear stockings and put my hair up and date football players. She had it planned to a tee how I'd be Miss Popularity. She said the key to everything was beauty and good grades" (122). Bitsy acts according to her script throughout high school; she dates Claude "Meathead" Wentworth IV, the most popular boy in high school and star of their football team; she continues to make "straight As and Bs" (288); she rolls her long blonde hair every morning "on empty lemonade cans" (213); and by the end of her senior year, she and Meathead are voted *Mr. and Miss Senior Class*

and *Cutest Couple*. Following graduation, Meathead gives Bitsy "a marquis diamond--one carat" (212). Their wedding, the culmination of what Dorothy considers to be a masterfully executed plan, is only shadowed by one unscripted detail--Bitsy is three months pregnant.

Surprisingly, Bitsy's cousin Violet seems to be a third-generation character who does successfully achieve self-fulfillment, despite her geographical embeddedness in the South. Ironically, her success as a modern Southern woman may be attributed to her dysfunctional upbringing in a non-traditional household. During the first twelve years of her life, Violet lives with her mother and philandering father in Louisiana, hundreds of miles from her mother's homestead in Tennessee. After her father's death in Vietnam, Violet's mother Clancy Jane suffers a nervous breakdown and Violet is forced to assume the role of family caretaker. When Merry, a friendly neighbor, asks Violet if she and her mother have any relatives who could help them, she replies simply, "All our relatives are dead" (75). It is not until Merry later convinces Clancy Jane to call her mother and tell her that Hart is dead that Violet even acknowledges that she has a grandmother or any other family in Tennessee. This absence of any family ties during Violet's formative years may account for her ability to separate herself from the traditional expectations of Southern women.

Although Miss Gussie eventually drives to New Orleans and convinces Clancy Jane to move back home to Crystal Falls and live with her, Violet cannot immediately accept her mother's family as her own: "I thought Mama's family probably hated us" (79). This distance between Violet and Miss Gussie, "the grandmother" (89), is

eventually closed; however, Violet later admits that despite her love for her grandmother and the contentment she feels living in her house, this new lifestyle is not an embedded part of her, as it is with her cousins, who have lived in Crystal Falls all of their lives:

It was such a new memory. I couldn't reach back into my childhood the way Bitsy or Mack could and know that the roses in the bedroom wallpaper had always been the same. I was just now getting used to nighttime creaks, the house expanding and contracting. I thought I might grow up and move away before I got accustomed to every little thing. (215)

During her adolescent years, Violet does not aspire to date the most popular boy in school or look like the models in *Young Miss*. She has not been brainwashed by her mother to believe that this is the appropriate way for a young Southern lady to act, unlike her cousin Bitsy who lives next door to her and is in the same grade. Because Violet is forced to assume an adult role very early in her life, assuming responsibility not only for herself but for her mother as well, she develops her own expectations for herself before she is introduced to the Southern traditions and expectations held by Miss Gussie or Dorothy. By the end of the novel, Violet is a scholarship recipient at The University of Tennessee studying ornithology and she also has a live-in boyfriend; she is then, an example of a modern woman whose only connection to the South is simply living there.

Ironically, although Violet seems to have become more successful than her cousin Bitsy, Bitsy admits that "I never envied her, not the first time, because I saw my life as natural and normal. I didn't need an education. I had an Mrs. degree, and she was working on her BS in biology" (299). This simple statement

illustrates how ingrained the traditional roles of wife and mother are in Bitsy, so much so that she is willing to give up her own happiness to pursue that which is "natural and normal."

Like Violet, Emily, Jane's half-sister in *The Odd Woman*, can also be deemed a self-fulfilled third-generation character. Despite Emily's seemingly traditional behavior, specifically her marriage to John at the age of fifteen, she is capable of manipulating the South's cultural scripts to fit her own desires. At the age of twelve she picks the man she wants to marry and woos him with elaborate meals. She graduates from high school three years early, enters college at fifteen, and by the age of nineteen, Emily is four-years happily married and a first-year law student. As Jane explains of Emily, "She's a unique person, all right. I don't think she likes me very much. I think she thinks I have too many problems when life, according to her, has been so simple" (64).

It is because of Emily's physical stature and her superb intellectual ability even as a child that she is never expected to assume the role of Southern belle, either by her family, her peers, or herself. When Emily is in the second grade, she agonizes over her wardrobe one morning before she goes to school, unaware that Jane is watching her. Jane is startled by her sister's preoccupation with clothes and wonders what Emily sees as she stares at "that heavy, impervious little face" (104) in the mirror. Remembering how cruel children can sometimes be to each other, Jane realizes that her sister is already suffering from her inability to look the part: "It was already clear to everyone in the family that Emily was not going to be a beauty. And she was not going to be a belle. Some group of

little girls was making Emily miserable" (104). At the age of twelve, Emily herself realizes that she is indeed different from the other girls in her class and writes in her diary, "I am twelve years and I have no secrets worth writing in this diary. I am now almost 5'9". I will never have a boyfriend. I hate the girls in my class. I will never flick my fingers helplessly in the air and cry, 'Oh, *you!*' and act like an ass" (110-11).

Despite Emily's torment during childhood, it is her looks, her intelligence, and her independence that eventually allow her to break free from the traditional mold of Southern femaleness and to actualize her own true desires. Because no one expects her to fulfill a traditional role, she does not feel guilty straying from that path.

In each of these novels, the characters' embeddedness in the South, in both its culture and its expectations, is presented as a hurdle that the third-generation characters must transcend to engage successfully in the "modern world." It seems that those women who are not emotionally tied to home and family are more successful in integrating the past with the present. Ironically, it is the women who are most condemned by their fellow Southerners for not fitting the stereotypical Southern belle image who most easily manage to escape the expectations of Southern femaleness.

# *The Perils of Progress*

## Chapter Five: A Sense of Dislocation

Dr. James Cobb, a history professor at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and author of the book *The New Mind of the South*, once stated that progress often leads to a feeling of dislocation within the individual. He made this comment to a class of College Scholars during a lecture on the South's emergence as an industrialized region of the country. His explanation was that as many of the South's larger cities begin to expand in both area and population, many of the individuals in these cities are losing their sense of embeddedness in Southern culture. As cities such as Charlotte, Memphis, Birmingham, and, most notably, Atlanta emerge as industrialized urban cities, they appear to lose the traditional characteristics that once made them distinctly Southern. In Dr. Cobb's opinion, these cities are beginning to mirror the Northern urban meccas--New York City, Chicago, and Washington D.C.--and it is this perceived progress that is causing the cities' citizens to experience a sense of dislocation. There is a concern by many people in the South that Southerners may now be distinguished simply by their geographic origin and not the characteristic personalities and attitudes that previously set them apart from the rest of the country. Although there is a freedom which accompanies progress, a lifting of the burden of traditional Southern stereotypes, many of the South's residents feel more anxiety than relief now that they are no longer being characteristically bound to a distinct place or region.

Similarly, as the role of the Southern woman evolves from the traditional Southern Belle stereotype to the more progressive modern woman, there is a sense of dislocation among this "new" generation of women. As previously noted in Chapter Four, the "new" Southern woman often struggles to break free from the expectations that were placed on both her mother and grandmother; however, after having acquired the freedom to live her life without any predetermined roles to fulfill, the "new" Southern woman often does not know how to handle this newfound freedom. Characteristic of the third-generation characters in *The Odd Woman, Tending to Virginia, Crazy Ladies*, and *Charms for the Easy Life*, many of the South's "new" women experience anxiety and a sense of purposelessness that accompany their break with the past. Rejecting their cultural scripts, they no longer are rooted in that which traditionally defined Southern women.

Ellen Glasgow described this "new" Southern woman as "shallow, egoistic, and without staying power" (Ekman 121). Her rationale was this:

The war had broken down the old ideals and code of manners but had put nothing in its place. The post-war woman thought she had freedom, but she did not know what to do with it. She had rebelled against the Victorian code, which, once admirable, had become distorted, but she found that the new morality was no more free than the old one had been. Virginia Pendleton and her generation had had something to sustain them, for they had clung to their faith in the Protestant Episcopal Church and to their trust in men, but the young generation had nothing to cling to except "their right to their own lives." As a result a restless seeking for something "to hold on to" and a demand for happiness possessed them. The modern woman no longer felt the need to sacrifice herself

for her family; she wanted the right to live her life as she chose, without regard for others. (121)

Although Miss Glasgow was speaking of the women of the 1920's and 1930's, her description is also applicable to the women of the latter half of the century.

Once again, Jane Clifford in *The Odd Woman* is an excellent example of the "new" Southern woman who illustrates this dislocation caused by her attempts to transcend the traditional roles of Southern femaleness. Jane obviously has succeeded in breaking free from many of the cultural scripts to which her mother and grandmother were bound. At the age of thirty-two, Jane remains unmarried, childless, and un beholden to anyone but herself. She has moved from the South to a midwestern college town, and she has achieved a successful career as an English professor at the local university. However, despite Jane's apparent success as a self-fulfilled modern woman, she continually struggles with feelings of loneliness and uncertainty throughout the novel. She is extremely characteristic of the "new" Southern woman Ellen Glasgow describes: she has successfully rejected the traditional moral code of Southern femaleness and now finds that she has "nothing to cling to." Unlike Kitty and Edith, Jane does not have a husband or children to care for; that which gave her mother's and grandmother's lives meaning is absent from her own. And "as a result a restless seeking for something 'to hold on to' and a demand for happiness" possesses her (Ekman 121).

Because Jane does not have a family or even a husband on whom to focus any of her attention, she is completely self-absorbed.



She explains to her friend and colleague Sonia Marks that, "Everything takes on more weight, even little things, when there is no one, no outside thing, to diffuse your attention from yourself" (68). Jane describes herself as her "own only child" and admits that she believes that "living alone spoils you. It makes it harder to get together with someone, if you ever do" (68). During this intimate conversation, Jane also explains that living alone forces an individual to search within herself for companionship, which often results in a conflicting battle between "your only lonely self's" (68-69):

"I say self, but that is another aspect of living alone: the self splits into many. Say, for instance, I'm in a bad mood and would like to pick a fight, only I don't have parents or a sister or a husband to pick a fight with. So I find some part of myself to have my fight with. I single it out and focus on it and make it miserable. I divide myself into tormentor and victim. One torments, the other cries out in pain, and the whole thing hurts. I suppose if one divided oneself and didn't manage to keep track of the whole thing, madness would result." (69)

Despite Jane's outward appearance as a self-fulfilled modern woman, this conversation illustrates her inner loneliness and her desire to find companionship ultimately with someone other than herself. This constant introspection, characteristic of the "new" Southern woman, often leads to her feeling of dislocation, the feeling that the one person or thing that could provide her with a sense of purpose or fulfillment is clearly missing from her life.

Jane's attempt to find something sustaining outside of the traditional roles her mother and grandmother have adopted results in a lifelong pursuit of formal education. Jane first uses education as a means to escape the abuse and control of her step-father, Ray;

however, she then finds that she excels in the college atmosphere and immerses herself in it, making it her career. Jane discovers that college is not only a refuge from her step-father but also from the uncertainties and conflicts of "the outside world":

Jane ventured briefly into the outside world after college, went to Europe, got engaged and unengaged from a nice Englishman, and hurried back into graduate school with relief, where, ever since, she had lived more in the nineteenth century than in her own. (41)

Jane's desire to avoid real-world problems also drives her to immerse herself in literature, specifically nineteenth-century literature. She has a tendency to compare her life to that of a nineteenth-century character and act as that character would act in a given situation. Jane's desire to find the answers to life's questions in a novel or college textbook only adds to her dislocation because of her inability to discover the answers to such questions through her own experiences. During her visit home, Kitty becomes exasperated with Jane when she begins to cry uncontrollably because her mother flushes the pages of her old diary before Jane can read them: "'You have to live your own evidence, dear little Jane. You cannot research everything, you know,' said Kitty scornfully" (189).

Another characteristic of the "new" Southern woman that not only Jane, but several of the other third-generation characters exhibit as well, is a disillusionment with religion. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers, these women do not take comfort in a personal relationship with God. Jane admits that "she no longer believed in the sort of God she prayed to" (249), the God her mother and grandmother believed in. And Virginia in *Tending to Virginia*

explains that she "had seen in Gram's eyes a childlike fear, a fear that she recognized, though Gram also had a calming sense of faith which Virginia could not feel" (249-50). The other characters exhibit their disillusionment with religion and God not with words, but through their actions. Despite the many references to church and prayer made by the older characters in these novels, the third-generation characters Violet, Bitsy, Cindy, and Margaret never speak of God nor do they attend church.

Like Jane Clifford, Virginia Turner Ballard in *Tending to Virginia* is also an example of a "new" Southern woman who experiences a sense of dislocation. Her dislocation is found in her attitudes toward her unborn baby and her husband. Because she does not feel the affection toward either one of them that she has been taught is natural, Virginia simply feels "so out of place sometimes" (257). Rather than affection, Virginia struggles with feelings of detachment. For instance, "She rubs her hand over her stomach and feels so detached from it all, this house, this room, that man that eats, sleeps, reads, and showers here" (10-11). Because of Virginia's traditional upbringing, she believes that her feelings are wrong and somehow make her less of a woman, or at least less than the kind of woman she is expected to be. Virginia cannot and does not wish to assume the roles of previous generations of women in her family, yet she is uncomfortable creating her own. She appears to be caught between following the examples of her mother and grandmother and blazing new territory, being equally uncomfortable and unsatisfied with both.

Whereas Jane attempts to define herself through the characters of a nineteenth-century novel, Virginia thinks of herself and others as paint on a canvas. During her pregnancy, a time of tremendous guilt and uncertainty for Virginia, she does not describe herself with the same bold colors and brush strokes as she does the other women in her family:

If she tried to paint something representative of herself for the sake of posterity right now it would be a smeary blob of nothing, scene after scene carved on top of another with nothing unique about any of it. It would be nothing like the soft pastels, soft as baby powder, that Gram would have, a strong dark background that holds the softness in place. Or Lena who would be a bright splash of color that, though opposite, would blend with Gram, or her mother who would be strong sharp lines that all connect and round at the corners. Even Cindy, though wildly abstract, would be appealing in the same way that someone says, "It's really interesting but I wouldn't want it on my wall." (25)

Virginia's feelings of self-deprecation can be attributed to the fact that she has no means of comparison by which to judge herself. She cannot use the criteria Hannah and Emily do because she is of a different generation, yet there are no defined guidelines on how to be a successful modern woman. Therefore, she continues to feel as if she simply does not measure up to the other women that she knows.

Virginia's desire to remain with her grandmother in her hometown of Saxapaw may also be attributed to her overwhelming sense of dislocation. Being at home locates Virginia not only in time and place, but also in a role--that of a daughter and granddaughter. The past is solid for her; there are no uncertainties or ambiguities: "Their [her family's] voices, their lives and words and stories are so

clear, so familiar as if there have been no changes at all" (33). This may indeed be the reason that many of the novels' third-generation characters long to remain at home with their grandmothers after having crossed the line into the real, more modern world.

Bitsy in *Crazy Ladies* similarly feels a sense of detachment from her unborn baby. However, rather than acknowledge this feeling like Virginia, she simply pretends that she is not pregnant. When Violet expresses concern for her cousin and her situation, Bitsy simply replies, "It's nothing. I don't even feel pregnant. I swear it's nothing at all" (228).

Bitsy's feelings of dislocation do not first appear with her pregnancy, however. She seems to exhibit such characteristics at a much earlier age. For instance, she speaks French, or "pig Latin" (200) as Dorothy refers to it, intermittently during conversations with her mother and other family members, suggesting that she views herself as being somewhat different from the rest of her family. Even as an adolescent, Bitsy explains, "I just didn't fit. My father wasn't rich enough, and my mother was too strange" (199). For most of her young life, Bitsy struggles to conform to a stereotype of the perfect Southern lady. Her early success at this conformity only leads to a larger sense of dislocation when she is forced out of that role. At the age of nineteen, Bitsy finds herself divorced with a small child to care for: "I was so scared. I'd be divorced and living in Crystal Falls. With a baby. Men would think I was an easy lay. Maybe they'd be right, maybe they'd be wrong" (304). Not only does Bitsy not know how others will view her, she does not know how to

view herself now that she no longer fits the role that she has ascribed to all of her life.

Ellen Glasgow states that the "new" Southern woman does not cling to a trust in men like the women of former generations. This is obviously true with many of these third-generation characters. Bitsy loses her trust in men when her husband Meathead divorces her to run around with an array of college coeds. Margaret, although she eventually falls in love with Tom Hawkings III, begins to distrust men at an early age because of her mother's and grandmother's previous unsuccessful relationships. Violet, Jane, Virginia, and Cindy also fail to place a firm trust in men for various reasons. Ironically, most of these women realize that their inability to trust men or to rely on them for security, both physical and emotional, is the primary reason for their feelings of dislocation. The one thing that firmly grounded their mothers and grandmothers to a specific code was their relationships with men. They were wives and mothers with defined roles, expectations and responsibilities. These third-generation characters understand that their roles are changing with the times in which they are living. Cindy understands that if she had lived when her grandmother did, she would not have divorced two husbands. "If I had lived when Grandma Tessy did," Cindy says, "then Charles and I would've stayed together. We would have made it work" (256-57). Bitsy, in turn, sees her inability to have a successful relationship as stemming not merely from the onslaught of time but from the example her parents set for her and her brother: "We didn't have whole families." (201).

In addition to their desires to remain at home, Margaret in *Charms for the Easy Life* and Violet in *Crazy Ladies* seemingly fill the void in their lives due to the absence of a husband or children with an overriding concern for their mothers. Although their dislocation is not as pronounced as that of many of the other characters, they both seem to assume the role of mother to their own mothers, worrying over them in a reversal of roles. Margaret lies in bed on the night her mother elopes with Richard Baines and worries as a mother would over a child: "I lay there and worried that my mother had just ruined another memory for herself, and I worried that she would return, pack her belongings, move out, and grow too lonesome" (223). Similarly, Violet assumes a nurturing role towards her mother at an early age: "The real me was trying to stay alive, trying to keep her [Clancy Jane] alive" (77).

Very much like the "new" Southern woman Ellen Glasgow describes, each of these third-generation women suffers from "a restless seeking for something 'to hold on to'" (Ekman 121). Their attempts to break free from the limitations of traditional Southern femaleness result in an uncomfortable void rather than exalted freedom. Unfortunately, as with Jane Clifford in *The Odd Woman* and Shirley Abbott, author of *WOMENFOLKS*, many of these Southern women attempt to escape this uncomfortable void by moving from the South and denying many of their Southern roots. The question then remains: "What truly defines progress?"

# *They Paved the Way*

## Chapter Six: My Conclusion

Like the third-generation characters in *Charms for the Easy Life*, *Crazy Ladies*, *Tending to Virginia*, and *The Odd Woman*, I too am a product of my mother and my grandmother, yet I am also very different from them both. Every time I go home for a visit, my stepfather comments on how much I am like my mother. He says this only seconds after telling her she is getting more and more like her own mother everyday. Ironically, we both seem to act as if we consider these words an insult.: "What do you mean I'm just like Mother?!" However, like my mother, I enjoy being outside; I like to wear nice clothes and I have an annoying habit of playing with my hair; I love my family and unfortunately I often feel guilty for not spending more time with them. These things I am sure I have learned from years of watching my mother, just as she similarly learned them from her mother. I realize that we do have many of the same characteristics; however, we each use these characteristics differently, to accomplish very different goals. I may sound like my mother, our mannerisms may be similar, and although I am slow to admit it, we sometimes may even act the same, but as individuals we are dramatically different. We are all dramatically different. At the age of twenty-two my grandmother was a newlywed, spending tireless days canning vegetables from my granddad's garden and cleaning their modest home. My mother was pregnant at my age, working at a local five and dime store and as she now admits, "feeling like an old woman." And me, at twenty-two, I am a single,



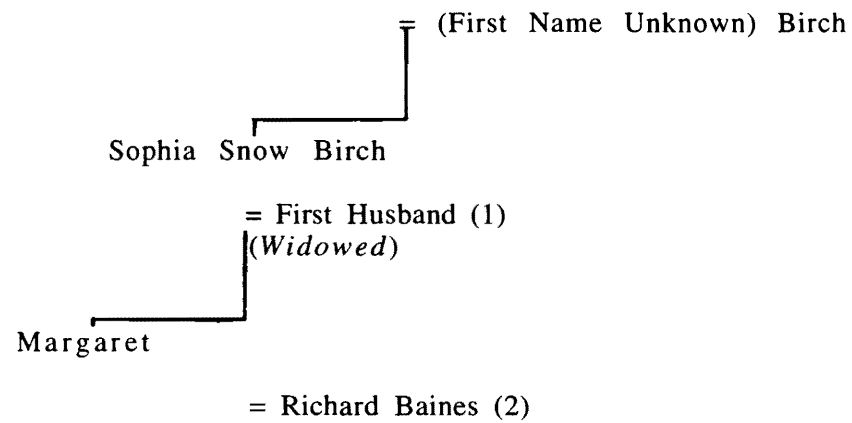
soon-to-be college graduate, planning and ready to take on the world.

Perhaps the one thing that differentiates me from my mother and my grandmother is opportunity. Unlike my grandmother, I have the opportunity to attend college. I am not limited to housework or child care, although these are also options open to me. And whereas my mother was expected to earn her degree in education or possibly nursing, I have the opportunity to specialize in my chosen field. My world is not as restrictive as my mother's and grandmother's; however--just as many of the novels' third-generation characters encountered--uncertainty, fear, and a sense of dislocation often accompany such progress.

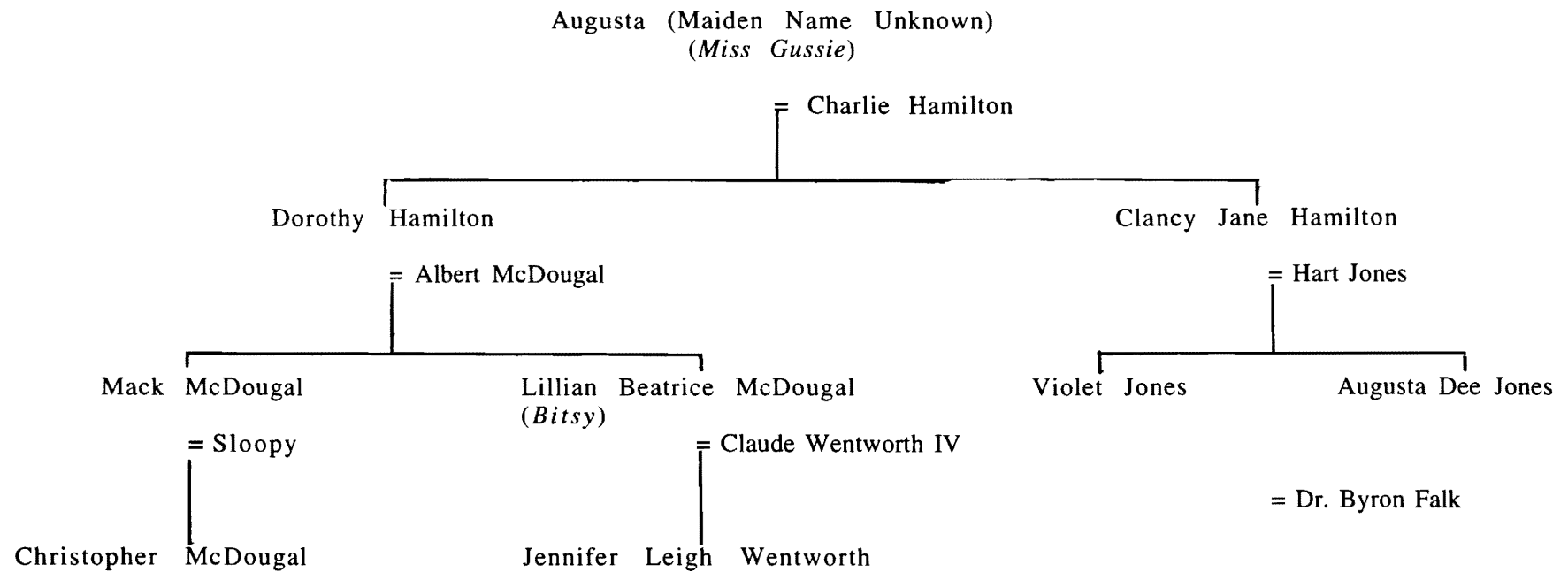
Fortunately, I believe I have inherited such traits from my ancestors to successfully make the transition from the Scarlett O'Hara stereotype to the "new" Southern woman. Perhaps I am extremely optimistic, ignorantly unaware, or even a little smug, but I would describe myself as one of the South's "smartest and most serious" women who in the words of Shirley Abbott "manage to fit in" (192). But then again, perhaps it is not a simple question of fitting in. Perhaps it is about feeling secure enough in your past--your heritage--to look ahead to your future. Luckily, my mama taught her little girl that she should be proud of where she came from, claim it as her own, and continually strive to make it a better place for her own children. I only hope that this is one family trait that I am able to pass along to the fourth generation of Nunley women. (And if I haven't said it before, thanks Mom.)

*Charms for the Easy Life*  
by Kaye Gibbons

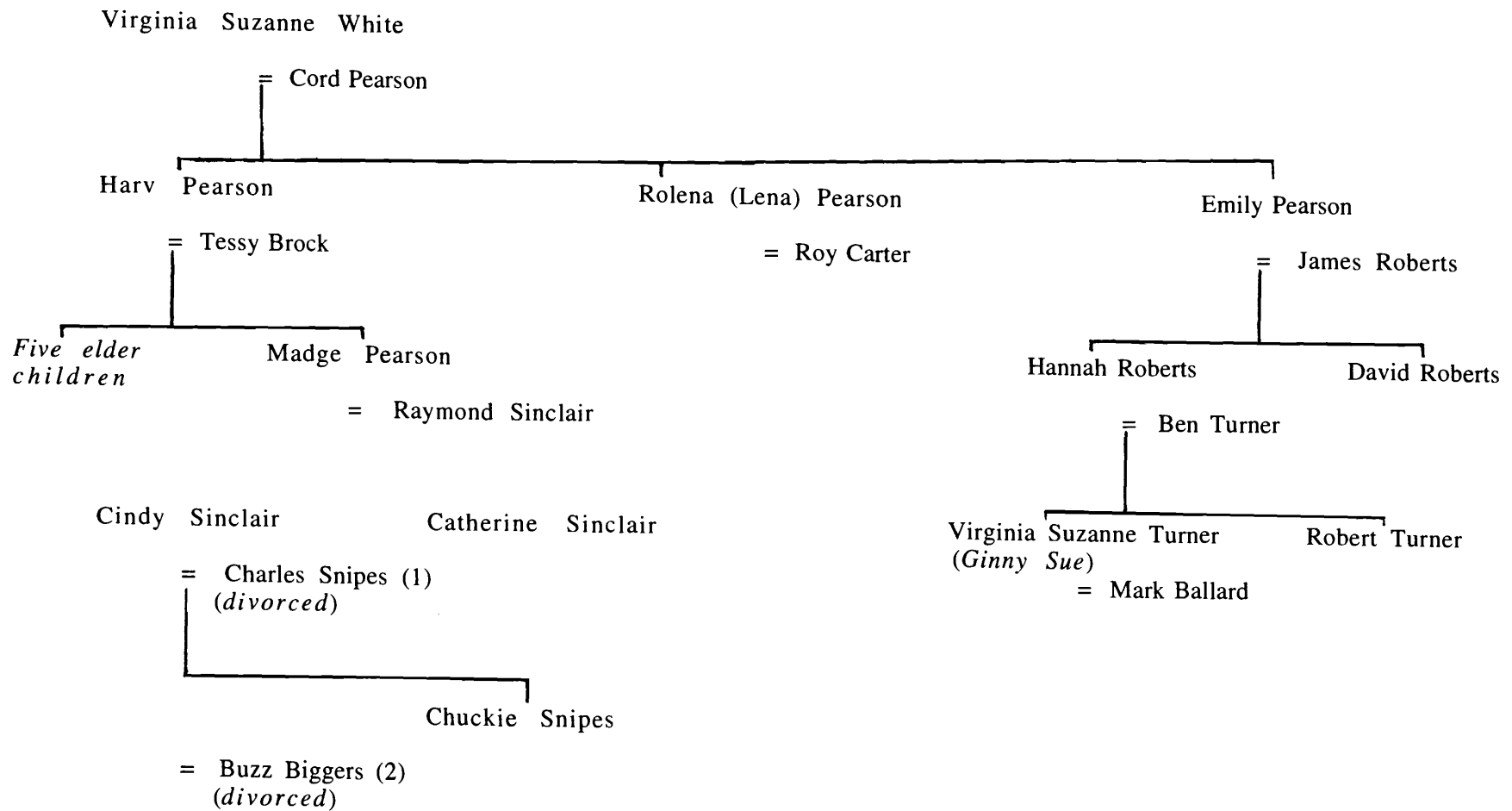
Clarissa (Maiden Name Unknown)  
(*Charlie Kate*)



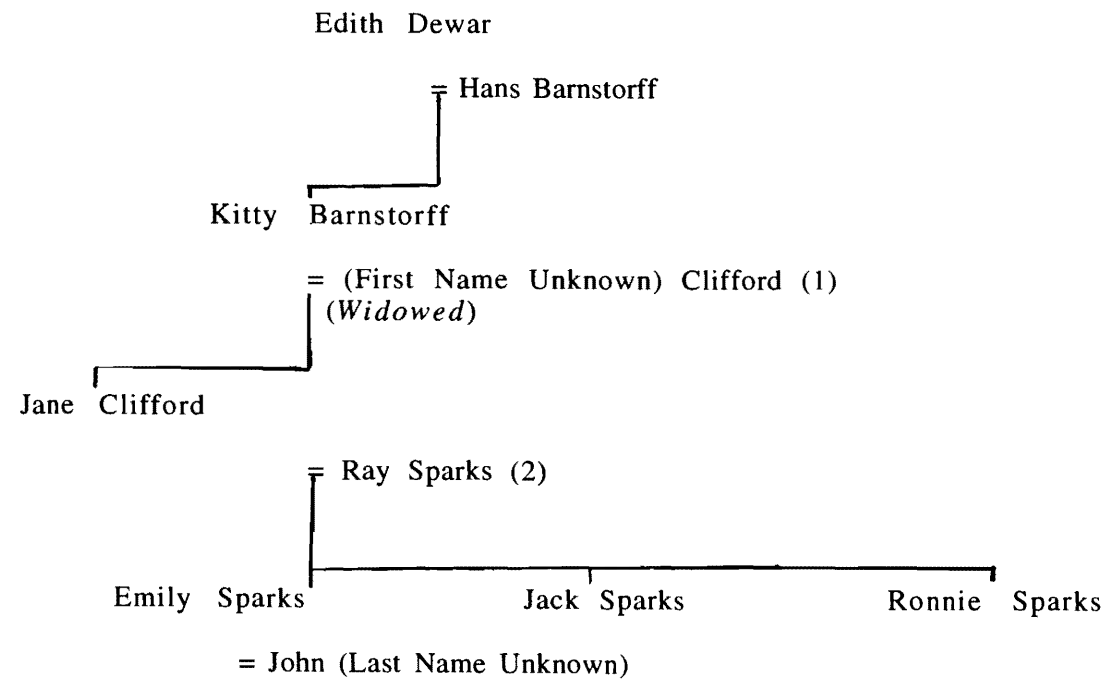
*Crazy Ladies*  
by Michael Lee West



*Tending to Virginia*  
by Jill McCorkle



*The Odd Woman*  
by Gail Godwin



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